



Oral History

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Oral History, the Library, and the Genealogical Researcher

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Libraries, museums, and historical societies are often called upon to provide historical material for genealogists and family researchers. As oral history becomes more and more one of the functions of such manuscript repositories, sometimes as producer and certainly as custodian, the question arises as to how the library can assist these family researchers to use the products of oral history. Speaking as an oral historian and not as a genealogist, I would like to address myself to what kinds of oral history materials are now available for research and what kinds of information these materials contain that might be of value to the genealogist. In other words, the genealogist as consumer of oral history materials and what he might expect to find on the market. And because the market is as yet uncharted, how the librarian can assist him in finding and using these materials.

In addition, I would like to explore other ideas which I feel could lead to a very productive liason between oral history and genealogy. For one, how can the genealogist use oral history techniques to acquire his own information.

For another, how can the genealogist, using oral history techniques, preserve information he acquires that may be only tangential to his own research, but which may be of great value to other historians; in other words, how to broaden the results of his research.

And conversely, how can the oral historian do more to acquire information that may be of value to the genealogist.

DEFINITION OF ORAL HISTORY

Before we go any further, what is oral history? Oral history is the taking down of the reminiscences of persons who have participated in or observed events of historical interest or who have experienced a past way of life. These reminiscences are taken down fully by some stenographic method—nowadays the tape recorder. The person who takes them down—the interviewer—takes an active part in the entire production by asking questions, often difficult and thought-provoking questions, which are based on his own careful preparation for the interview. The purpose of this interviewing is to preserve the narrator's information for *any* researchers who can use it, now (if the interview is not so confidential as to require being closed for a number of years) or in the distant future.

There is nothing new about talking to the participants in an event in order to gather historical information. In the fifth century, B.C., Herodotus, the Greek "Father of History," was collecting facts by the question and answer method for his history of the Persians. The special thing about oral history is that the information sought is not just for the specific research of the questioner, but for the use of a broad range of researchers. Not knowing what all this as-yet-absent-group will be interested in, the questions must be broad and far-ranging. And the entire answer must be preserved, for it may be that little aside-story that would never have gotten down in handwritten notes which proves to be just what someone fifty years from now wants to know. All this can be done through the use of the tape recorder.

It can, or could, also be done more laboriously by handwritten stenographic notes. As early as the 1840s, Lyman Copeland Draper, a librarian, began collecting the historical accounts of old Revolutionary soldiers and border heroes, a task he characterized as a "pious—and I might add—thankless labor of rescuing from forgetfulness and neglect the memories of an interesting band of worthies." While his original intent was to use this information and the collaborating documents he collected to write history books about the American

Revolution and the Indian fighting of the period 1740-1815, he became so involved in the preservation of this information that he finally gave up his goal of interpretation and writing. At his death he left to the library of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin 486 bound volumes of transcripts—a collection that was heavily used by Frederick Jackson Turner in developing his theory of the frontier.¹

In California in the 1870s, Hubert Howe Bancroft, a businessman-turned-historian, began a similar program of taking down the statements of old California grantees and pioneers. Bancroft intended these dictations as the basis of a projected series of books on the history of the West and he was considerably more successful than Draper in this intent. Through the establishment of a virtual history mill, Bancroft and the total of 600 persons he employed over the years (12 to 50 at one time), turned out the 39-volume set of the *Works of Hubert Howe Bancroft* and the 7-volume set of *Chronicles of the Builders*. Basic to these writings were the Dictations taken down by Bancroft, his wife, and some of his literary agents, plus the many collaborative documents they collected at the same time—all of which now form the nucleus of the Bancroft Library of the University of California at Berkeley. Of his wife's part in this stenographic work, Hubert Howe Bancroft's son said in an oral history interview for our office:

"She [Mother] used to go with my father when he would take dictations and collect data—he would try to collect data from the old pioneers that were dying off—and she would very often get data discussions and information from the pioneers' wives. She'd take that all down in longhand."²

These Dictations, three entire bookcases of bound volumes, are still consulted daily in the Bancroft Library by researchers—many of them after genealogical information, and the Dictations have been very useful to those trying to trace an ancestor who came West.

So far as we know, there was a considerable hiatus from the 1880s until the late 1940s in what might be called oral history, although the gaining of historical information by talking to eye witnesses never stopped. For one, the prolific Mormon church historian, Andrew Jensen, who worked unceasingly in collecting and writing history from the 1870s until his 91st year in 1941, reported interviewing many pioneers and veterans in his travels to almost every settlement of the Church.

It was in 1948 that Professor Allan Nevins, historian and writer,

established the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University to implement the "creation" of historical documents, a job by then made feasible by the invention of magnetic recording devices. As with Draper's and Bancroft's earlier endeavors, these records were based on questioning by an informed interviewer, with the answers being preserved in toto, and without a specific thesis being the purpose of the inquiry. By 1955 oral history projects were being established throughout the country.

THE EXTENT OF ORAL HISTORY IN THE UNITED STATES

In 1967 a survey by Columbia University's Oral History Research Office listed 79 oral history projects. Shortly thereafter the Oral History Association was formed and that membership now includes about 373 members (the number increases daily) representing about 300 projects. A new survey is presently underway by the Oral History Association. Whatever number of projects the survey shows, it is safe to assume that there are at least half again as many projects which are not affiliated with the Oral History Association or with a major institution, but which may be producing excellent oral history materials. For example, at a round table on oral history held at the 1969 meeting of the Conference of California Historical Societies, there were representatives from 29 historical associations, 17 of which had already begun oral history programs, and 10 of which were preparing to begin one. Many of these new projects, as part of a local historical society, may well have information of a genealogical nature on persons who come from that locality.

VARIETY OF ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS

The focus of oral history projects is extremely varied. I mention just a few to give some idea of the breadth of subject matter handled.

General projects handling a variety of subject fields, usually "great men" interviews or especially qualified observers. Foremost and oldest is Columbia University's Office of Oral History Research. They conduct interviews in many fields such as New York State political candidates, the history of the Federated Department Stores, Social Security legislation, United States Navy leaders, civil rights, mining engineers, and perhaps fifty other subjects.

The Bancroft Library's Regional Oral History Office, founded in 1954, is a similar general project, although much smaller. We have series of interviews underway on forestry and conservation, Western

agriculture, the California wine industry, community leaders of San Francisco, the University of California, and our newest project, state politics during the administrations of Governor Earl Warren.

The University of California at Los Angeles has a general project which covers Southern California.

Regional projects which interview both "great men" of the locality and "old-timers." This is the subject area best handled by libraries, community colleges, and local and state historical societies. It is highly likely that if an area has such an oral history project, it will contain information on the long-established families of that area. The genealogist should inquire about such regional projects at the same time he is searching local court and vital statistics records.

Special subject projects include interviews with "great men" and with the "rank and file"; the majority of oral programs are of this kind. Cornell University began by specializing in agricultural interviews, although it has now become a general projects program; the Forest History Society specializes in the "great" of the American forest industry; labor interviews are being done at Wayne State University (Detroit), the University of Massachusetts, and Penn State; the University of Texas has recorded the development of the state's oil industry; Tulane University records jazz musicians. Many professional organizations have quite properly elected to chronicle the recent history of their profession through interviews with their own notables. Most prolific have been the medical specialties, with tape recording going on at the National Library of Medicine, the Dermatology foundation in Miami, Florida, the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and Mt. Sinai Hospital in New York City, to mention but a few. Physicists are being recorded by the American Institute of Physics, artists by the American Archives of Art.

The history and contributions of ethnic and cultural communities is the focus of a number of oral history projects. Most prominent of these is the American Indian History Project being conducted by the universities of Utah, Arizona, Illinois, South Dakota, New Mexico, and Oklahoma through the support of Miss Doris Duke. This project is preserving on tape and transcript hundreds of years of oral tradition of various Indian tribes, including family histories. The Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is conducting a program to preserve the oral genealogies of the peoples of the South Pacific.

Projects devoted to Negro history such as the oral history program

at Mary Holmes College in West Point, Mississippi, and the Civil Rights Documentation Project in Washington, D. C., will get down family backgrounds, often unrecorded otherwise, along with the many other aspects of Negro history they seek to document. In our own office, a series on California-Russian emigrés will result in family information otherwise lost or only available in the Soviet Union, and a Jewish community series is documenting the contributions of some leading Jewish families to the San Francisco cultural milieu.

Great men and their era. An oral history program has been incorporated as part of the collecting procedure of all of the Presidential libraries, and of the other great men libraries. The libraries usually combine the collection of biographical information about the man with information on his administration or sphere of influence, so the oral history interviews would be with his colleagues, his friends, and often with his enemies. If the person being researched was any of these to the following notables, advise the patron to get in touch with the appropriate library: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman, Herbert Hoover, Dwight D. Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, L. B. Johnson, General George Marshall, John Foster Dulles, Earl Warren.

Institutional history. The most popular focus for an oral history project is an *institution*, the project's own institution. Our office began with a series on the University of California. Most projects begin with the history of their own institution, quite properly so, because that is the subject for which they have the prime responsibility and the greatest capability of doing well. If the subject of research was prominent in a church, an educational institution or an industry,—Ford Motor Company, perhaps, they have interviewed 434 leaders and rank and file, or IBM company—try there first for information.

RESEARCH AIDS FOR THE USE OF ORAL HISTORY MATERIALS

Let us assume the patron has run into a blank wall on his man's pedigree and needs a new clue to go on, or that he wants to know more about his man's character and activities and wants to search for references within the transcripts and tapes of oral history. Where can he begin?

Any library which services researchers in recent American history or in genealogy should collect information on oral history throughout the United States. This should include the publications of the Oral History Association and the catalogs put out by various oral history offices which describe their holdings. A special effort should be made to have any local or regional oral history project deposit lists of its

holdings in the library.

The Oral History Association (Box 20, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York City) offers a special library subscription for \$5 annually. This entitles the library to all publications such as membership lists, proceedings of the annual colloquia, and the Oral History Association Newsletter. In the Newsletter will be found information on the research specialties of this or that oral history office. Within six months the OHA will have a neat booklet listing every known oral history project and its specialties.

The Oral History Association soon expects to have worked out an acceptable way of reporting to the Library of Congress the listings of substantial groups of oral history interviews (12 interviews or 1 linear foot of transcripts) for inclusion in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections. Once included in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, at least locating a likely oral history project will be no more difficult than finding a pertinent manuscript collection. This will still not cover smaller projects, nor will it be broken down into the family names of the interviewees.

Most promising for genealogical research of all the up-coming finding aids is the California Bibliographic Center for Oral History Materials which is now in the advanced planning stage. Plans call for locating the Bibliographic Center in the State Library in Sacramento where card files will be kept on all oral history materials available for research in California. Colleges, libraries, museums, historical societies, and individuals producing oral history interviews will be asked to submit specific information on the interviewees and the subjects covered. They will also be asked to indicate the conditions under which these materials can be consulted by researchers. Each listed interview will be cross filed under at least four headings, including the name of the interviewee and the locality he discusses, plus the major topics he talks about. All of this will be put on computer tape so that researchers may get a rapid print-out listing all the interviews dealing with their topic of interest. This program will cover the smaller projects, it will be indexed by family name, and it will provide for the answering of inquiries by mail. My advice to the genealogical researcher is to wait a year or so and then look up a California family. Of course it is our hope that if this Bibliographic Center proves successful and not too expensive, it will be duplicated in all 49 other states. If that occurs, oral history materials will become easily locatable.

So far, our hypothetical patron has been trying to find oral history

projects in which his man may have been an interviewee or have been described by one of the interviewees. Fortunately, most projects index the names of persons mentioned in the interviews (if they transcribe; if they just hold tapes, the patron is in for a long period of listening). The index to each interview appears in the back of that interview. It is not much more difficult to make a cumulative index—a card file which will cover all the interviews done by the project, and many projects maintain such a cumulative index. A subject index is another thing, much more difficult and time consuming, and you will not find that as often as a name index.

Because oral history is still young, the projects small, the staffs devoted and enthusiastic, the patron may well receive a reply to a mail inquiry on whether the project does have any information on his person.

Let us say he has now located several likely projects and has ascertained that they do have some information about his man. How accessible are the interviews for research? In my opinion, here lies a stumbling block to the use of oral history. Most projects only produce one or two copies of the interviews and these must be consulted on their premises. They may require special permission before the researcher can see them—the director's permission for any interview, or the written permission of the interviewee or his heirs, or they may simply be closed for a certain number of years.

The restrictions which are requested by the interviewee are a necessary provision of any oral history program—you cannot ask someone to tell all and then open it to the public. Either he censors it before he speaks, or you offer to put the sensitive portions under lock and key for the period of time he requests. These limitations to use are just part of the game. But the limitation that results from one copy in one location, and therefore usable only by those who can afford to go to that location, are not necessary.

Our office is experimenting with depositing copies of our interviews in other manuscript repositories throughout the nation, repositories which have a special interest in the topic of the interview. The receiving repository agrees to make it available to its patrons on the same terms as it can be used in the Bancroft Library. That includes getting written permission before quoting anything for publication. We hope this effort will increase the usefulness of our interviews by making them accessible to those who do not have unlimited research time and travel funds.

Interlibrary loan is another possibility under consideration, a

feasible plan when the holding library has an extra copy and can risk mailing one out. At present exploratory steps are being taken by several projects on having their oral history transcripts microfilmed and available through commercial companies in the same way that dissertations are now made available. It is hoped these methods and a policy of wider distribution will enhance the value of oral history to researchers.

The moral of this last section on accessibility of interviews is to be sure the patron writes ahead before traveling to see a particular interview. He may have to arrange prior written permission to see the interview, or happily, he may discover there is a copy closer to his home, or that his local library may be able to acquire a copy for his use.

Having helped the patron on a merry chase through various oral history projects, let us consider how likely it is that when and if he finds pertinent oral history interviews, they will contain information of any genealogical use. The answer depends on what kind of a genealogy he is developing.

If he is seeking clues to a pedigree, the family blood line, then it is not likely that there will be much in oral history because of oral history's emphasis on actual eyewitness information. This will go back at best only seventy or so years and, except in unusual cases, there is better information available for that recent a time. However, most projects, ours included, do ask the interviewee for a brief run-down of his family background and I know of one instance where this led to a clue—the county in Ireland of the interviewee's mother's birth—which enabled a descendant to trace the family back to the Old Country.

If, however, the family researcher is trying to make the people in his genealogy live as real people, not just as names that were born, baptised, married, became parents, and died, then he may very well find lively descriptions of the more recent ancestors in oral history interviews. It helps, of course, if they were prominent members of a community, profession, or an institution (or a jazz musician or Texas oilman).

USE OF ORAL HISTORY METHODS BY THE GENEALOGIST

So much for what the family researcher may find in already produced oral history interviews. Of probably greater value is how the genealogist can use oral history techniques to gather his own information.

Oral historians have been experimenting for approximately twenty years now on the most effective ways to use the tape recorder to preserve information. At their annual meetings they mull over such problems as how to pre-plan the interview, how to set the interviewee at ease, how to work up to topics that are very sensitive or about which the interviewees may have forgotten until the events are recalled to him step-by-step, how to preserve the information in transcript or tape, how to have the information checked by the interviewee, how to index the information so it will be useful to others.

Two manuals that briefly describe some of these techniques, and which should be available in the library, are:

William G. Tyrell, *Tape Recording Local History*, 1966. Available for 25 cents from the American Association for State and Local History, 132 Ninth Avenue North, Nashville, Tennessee.

Willa K. Baum, *Oral History for the Local Historical Society*, 1969. Available for \$1.75 from Conference of California Historical Societies, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California.

Assuming that the genealogical researcher has a living ancestor or so, all of these techniques can be used to capture and preserve the oral traditions of the family. While I cannot summarize the discussions of many meetings on these matters, I might mention a few procedures which could be helpful to the family researcher.

1. Make a definite and businesslike appointment to talk to the old family member at a time in the future—perhaps in a week. Then remind him of the appointment again a day before the interview.

2. Submit to him a list of topics you will want to discuss, organized in logical fashion, and with as much factual data as you can supply, such as names, dates, and places. This will aid your narrator in recalling events; the week's time before the appointment will give him time to organize his thoughts and dredge up old memories.

3. Arrange to meet in a place where you can be alone and undisturbed for at least an hour.

4. Turn on the recorder when you come in and leave it on—avoid on-off activity as this will only make your narrator more aware of the recorder.

5. Try to stick to the topic of family history, keeping to the outline if you can, but without shutting off a story that may seem irrelevant. Old people often take the long way around to get to the point, but if you let them go, you will often find that their thoughts are

very logical and that the information so gained is important, although it may be quite different from the way you had imagined things to have been.

6. End the interview before your narrator becomes fatigued; set up another appointment for next week.

7. If your relationship to the narrator is too close to permit a businesslike interview, try to get someone else to handle it for you. We have found that too close a relationship does not make for a good interview.

A valuable service of a local genealogical society could be to have experienced interviewers who would do the interviewing for a family researcher. It is often easier for an outsider to get information than a family member.

CONTRIBUTIONS THE GENEALOGIST CAN MAKE TO HISTORICAL RESEARCH

This brings me to my third major consideration—How can the genealogist, using oral history techniques, increase the usefulness of his research to other historical researchers? And what role can the library or the local historical society play in preserving this research?

Let me quote from an eminent historian:

“But why, I say, does the study of family history not appeal more strongly to scholars? Because it is not often treated as a science, is perhaps the best answer. Genealogy as it is customarily studied or developed does not closely ally itself with other fields of serious research. In this genealogy is weak. If it is to receive honor from the historian, the anthropologist, or the sociologist, it must contribute something to the sciences into which these men delve. For every true science does contribute to every other true science. Genealogy has done much to make people happy, a little perhaps to make people better. But in so far as it merely contributes to vanity and self-satisfaction, it is unworthy to rank as a science.³

That was spoken in 1912 by Charles K. Bolton,⁴ librarian of the Boston Athenaeum, at the 9th annual meeting of the American Historical Association. He went on to urge the genealogist to preserve such information; what books did the family read, what were their political views, who were some of the closest neighbors, what physical characteristics have been passed from one generation to another. The modern sociologically-sophisticated historian would want to know in addition about the child rearing practices of the family, the peck

order of the siblings, the real role of the father and mother. The cultural geographer would ask about the migration patterns of the family.

Information like this would be too voluminous to take down by notes, but this is the kind of detail that can be preserved by the use of the tape recorder and oral history techniques. And this is the kind of detail that could be primary source material for other researchers as well as adding enough life to a family book to even make it interesting to the younger descendants.

In doing a recording of this broader nature, the researcher should be prepared not only with as many family dates and facts as possible, but with some idea of the major events that occurred during his ancestor's lifetime. Some preliminary hours spent in reviewing a U. S. history book (I like John D. Hicks, *The American Nation*), a state history, and a local history (call on the local historical society for help on that), and in preparing questions on appropriate events will pay rich dividends in the quality of interview that can be obtained.

A well-done recording with a family member should be kept by the family even after the information desired for the family book has been copied down. But it is no insurmountable problem to make a copy of that tape, to index it, with a written list of what subjects it covers, and to donate it to the local historical society, library, or museum where it could be used by other researchers. If even a few families in each community did this, think what a vast resource of local history we would have available, a resource that in most likelihood will be lost forever if it is not preserved by some such volunteer effort.

CONTRIBUTIONS THE ORAL HISTORIAN CAN MAKE TO THE GENEALOGIST

This article has been focused on how the family researcher, aided by the librarian, can make the most effective use of oral history materials, and, when the materials are missing, how he can use oral history techniques to develop his own information. Secondly, how the family researcher as producer and the library as custodian may assist future researchers through the tape recording and preservation of the genealogist's researches. I would like to end on a third point, that of urging my fellow oral historians to do more for the genealogical researcher. Every interviewee should be asked to do some homework on his family background and be prepared to put down his ancestry with names and dates as accurately as he can. Because most oral

history projects operate on small budgets, and often with a definite and fairly narrow purpose (for example, the development of the Food and Drug Act), it may not be feasible to make this family background a part of the recording and transcribing process. But it would take only a small effort to ask each interviewee to fill out a form on his background, and most interviewees would be pleased to be asked to make this of record. Such an information sheet added to the interview would do much to increase the value of oral history to the genealogist. Such a cooperative partnership of genealogist, librarian, and oral historian would yield much mutual benefit.

FOOTNOTES

*Mrs. Baum is director of the Regional Oral History Office of the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, and a member of the Council of the Oral History Association. The following article is a revision of a speech delivered at the World Conference on Records, Salt Lake City, August 1969. A full copy of the speech may be obtained from the Genealogical Society of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Inc., (Area I-19, \$.25) through whose courtesy parts of it are reproduced here.

¹From an article by Charles William Conaway "Lyman Copeland Draper, 'Father of American Oral History'" in *Journal of Library History*, 1, October, 1966.

²Philip Bancroft, *Politics, Farming, and the Progressive Party*, an oral history interview by the Regional Oral History Office, University of California Berkeley, 1962, p. 25.

³Mr. Bolton was author of several historical biographies, a book on the private soldier during Washington's time, and a book on Scottish and Irish pioneers. This was in addition to his writings on librarianship.

⁴*Ibid.*